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CIA
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In a rare public session, the Senate Intelligence Committee approved a bill Tuesday that would streamline the process by which the CIA makes available information under the Freedom of Information Act.

In a related action, the committee released an exchange of letters between Sen. Dave Durenberger, R-Minn., and CIA Director William Casey, in which Casey promised to set up a major new program to declassify documents considered of historical interest.

It was the first time since Reagan abolished compulsory declassification last year that the CIA has indicated a willingness to release at least some documents without a court order.

The legislation was the result of a compromise worked out between the CIA and the committee to improve the security of sensitive CIA files and cut down a tremendous backlog of Freedom of Information Act requests, while still maintaining public access to virtually all material now released by the agency.

Supporters said the bill will only restrict the type of information the CIA would have to search in response to the legal requests. Much of it is classified and the agency will not release it in any case.

A similar bill has been introduced in the House by Rep. Romano Mazzoli, D-Ky.

The CIA sought an exemption from the search procedures because it was creating an enormous administrative burden, with some requests taking as long as three years to fulfill when the time limit for compliance is 10 days.

As part of the compromise, the CIA agreed to retain financing of its information office at the current level to attack the backlog.

The legislation, sponsored by Sen. Barry Goldwater, R-Ariz., would exempt from public access all "operational" files -- the CIA's most sensitive files.

Operational files deal with actual CIA activities such as foreign intelligence, counterintelligence and counter-terrorism; operations and investigation of potential sources in those areas, and relationships with foreign governments and intelligence services.

Historians and journalists claim the exemption is large enough to allow the CIA to withhold information indefinitely.

In Casey's letter, he agreed to set up a major new program to declassify historical documents.

"If Congress is willing to provide the resources," Casey's letter said, "I am prepared to institute a new program of selective declassification review of

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